ART AND RELIGION IN W. B. YEATS:

THE POET AND THE SAINT

by

Joan Rowena Pannell

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Greensboro
May, 1965

Approved by

Robert Watson

Director

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, North Carolina.

Thesis Director Robert W. Watson

Oral Examination Committee Members Arthur W. Dixon

Jean R. Burchett

Donald L. Russell

May 4 1965

Date of Examination

PANNELL, JOAN ROWENA. Art and Religion in W. B. Yeats: The Poet and the Saint. (1965) Directed by: Dr. Robert Watson. pp. 79.

Yeats believed that the aim of poetry was to realize and communicate with an ideal spiritual world. To him, the illuminative powers of poetry were dependent upon the employment of symbolism, and the efficacy of symbols, in turn, was dependent upon the existence of a great racial memory, a collective storehouse to which he attributed many of the characteristics commonly ascribed to a deity. In a moment of heightened consciousness, he thought, the poet may become conjoined with his buried self, that part of himself which finds its home in the Anima Mundi, and enjoy a unity of being; at the same time he discovers a truth he may express in his poetry. The experience of the poet is very similar to that of the religious mystic in its qualities of transcendence, fulfillment, unity, and revelation.

On the other hand, the poet does not accompany the mystic the full length of his journey, for the poet's purpose is rather the knowledge of truth than the experience of union; he does not seek for an ineffable ecstasy because his function is to communicate. Another important difference between the poet and the mystic, or "saint" as Yeats terms him, is that according to his system of psychological types set forth in A Vision, the personality of the poet is dominated by the "antithetical tincture" while the saint is primary. Whereas the saint may achieve perfection in himself, the "antithetical" man finds unity of being only in his work.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to thank Dr. Robert Watson for his thoughtful guidance in the writing of this thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter I. THE ILLUMINATIVE POWERS OF POETRY	3
II. THE POET AND THE SAINT	27
III. THE CHOICE	62
A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	77

INTRODUCTION

Yeats believed that the aim of poetry was to realize and communicate with an ideal spiritual world. To him, the illuminative powers of poetry were dependent upon the employment of symbolism, and the efficacy of symbols, in turn, was dependent upon the existence of a great racial memory, a collective unconscious he called the Anima Mundi, an archetypal storehouse to which he attributed many of the characteristics commonly ascribed to a deity. In a moment of heightened consciousness, he thought, the poet may become conjoined with his buried self, that part of himself which finds its home in the Anima Mundi, and enjoy a unity of being; at the same time he discovers a truth he may express in his poetry. The experience of the poet is very similar to that of the religious mystic in its qualities of transcendence, fulfillment, unity, and revelation.

This paper will study Yeats's work with the purpose of establishing his view of the relationship existing between art and religion, and as a corollary his concept of the role of the poet as compared to that of the religious man, particularly the mystic. To do this, it will be necessary to investigate his concepts of "God," "truth," and "reality." For a standard with which to compare the aesthetic way as Yeats sees it I will use his own

interpretation of the mystic way as it is explained in the Mandukya Upanishad, and the outline of general characteristics of mysticism to be found in William James's Varieties of Religious Experience. Finally, I will examine Yeats's evaluation of himself as a symbolist poet.

CHAPTER I

THE ILLUMINATIVE POWERS OF POETRY

Yeats devoted his life to the effort of shaping a vision that would include both natural and supernatural in one focus and illuminate a superior order of things. He believed that poetry is a means of communication with this spiritual world and that its primary purpose is revelation. In 1898 he wrote in a Dublin newspaper column that the artistic movement of the day, emphasizing as it did traditional mythology, would more and more lead men to "reject the opinion that Poetry is a 'criticism of life,' and be more and more convinced that it is a revelation of a hidden life. . . . They may even come to think 'painting, poetry, and music' 'the only means of conversing with eternity left to men on earth'."[1] Although as he grew older the poet came to place more importance on the actual, it was because he realized that commerce with eternity is carried on through the actual, that all "ladders start / In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart."[2] Towards the end of his

---

[1]Quoted by V. K. Narayana Menon in The Development of W. B. Yeats (Philadelphia, 1961), pp. 37-38.

[2]W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems (N. Y., 1956), p. 336. Future references in the text will be to this edition of the poetry, abbreviated as CP.

life, in 1937, Yeats wrote, "I am convinced that in two or three generations it will become generally known that the mechanical theory has no reality, that the natural and the supernatural are knit together."[3]

According to Yeats, art is revelatory in so far as it is symbolic, and the efficacy of symbols is due to the existence of a great memory passed on from generation to generation, an Anima Mundi similar to Jung's racial unconscious. Poetry and music are an enchantment whose spell charms by subconscious associations, sometimes with objects or events not within one's personal experience. His investigations into occultism and spiritualism convinced Yeats of the power of a number of minds to coalesce into a single mind or energy which may be considered the archetypal storehouse of the human imagination.

> Almost everyone who has ever busied himself with such matters has come, in trance or dream, upon some new and strange symbol or event, which he has afterwards found in some work he had never read or heard of. Examples like this are as yet too little classified, too little analyzed, to convince the stranger, but some of them are proof enough for those they have happened to, proof that there is a memory of Nature that reveals events and symbols of distant centuries. Mystics of many countries and many centuries have spoken of this memory; and the honest men and the charlatans, who keep the magical traditions, which will someday be studied as a part of folk-lore, base most that is of importance in their claims upon this memory.
>
> E & I 46

---

[3]Essays and Introductions (N. Y., 1961), p. 518. Future references in the text to this volume will be abbreviated E & I.

In his essay on "Magic" Yeats stated that he believed in three doctrines which have been the foundations of magical practices from early times. These doctrines are:

(1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.

(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

E & I 28

Whether employed "consciously by the masters of magic, or half unconsciously by their successors, the poet, the musician, and the artist" (E & I 49), symbols are the greatest of all powers. Due to the correspondence between categories of existence implicit in the theory of symbolism, and the unity between nature and spirit which may be thought proved by the success of "magic," even the most trivial of accidental circumstances may serve as a symbol, a sort of microcosm reflecting the universal: "Whatever the passions of men have gathered about, becomes a symbol in the Great Memory, and in the hands of him who has the secret it is a worker of wonders, a caller-up of angels or devils" (E & I 50). The symbol is a means of embodying the invisible by clothing borrowed from the natural world by the imagination. In a letter to George Russell (AE) Yeats wrote, "The imagination deals with spiritual things symbolized by

natural things--with gods and not with matter."[4] By gods it is most likely he means here "disembodied powers" he has elsewhere associated with moods or emotions (E & I 157, 195).

Yeats sees artistic communication as a magical practice. Aside from the evocative powers of images, artistic form itself has an enchanting effect. "Have not poetry and music arisen, as it seems, out of the sounds the enchanters made to help their imagination to enchant, to charm, to bind with a spell themselves and the passers-by?" (E & I 43). As the ticking of a watch, or the monotonous flashing of a light, induces trance, so does the pattern of the artist, "the monotonous flash woven to take the eyes in a subtler enchantment" (E & I 159), or the rhythm of the poet, "prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols" (E & I 159).

Somehow or other, the mesmerizing effect of the rhythmic procession of images can induce a state of ecstatic contemplation of the sort that has frequently been compared to the condition of fire in mystical literature.

---

[4]Allan Wade, ed., The Letters of W. B. Yeats (N. Y., 1955), p. 343. Future references in the text to this collection will be abbreviated Wade.

> There are two realities, the terrestrial and the condition of fire. . . . After so many rhythmic beats the soul must cease to desire its images, and can, as it were, close its eyes.
>
> When all sequence comes to an end, time comes to an end, and the soul puts on the rhythmic or spiritual body or luminous body and contemplates all the events of its memory and every possible impulse in an eternal possession of itself in one single moment. That condition is alone animate, all the rest is phantasy, and from thence come all the passions, and some have held, the very heat of the body.[5]

The differences between the true mystical experience and the aesthetic experience as Yeats describes it here--chiefly that the soul in this aesthetic fire has attained no unity with a higher being, but has rather achieved a complete self-realization; and that this soul does not regard the world as transformed by any quality perceived as holy--are obvious, but the suggestion that the experience is transcendental and noetic puts it in the same category with the ecstasy enjoyed by religious mystics.

It is clear that Yeats's esoteric aesthetics and interest in magic were part of a religious quest. In a letter to Lionel Johnson he stated that "an idealism or spiritualism which denies magic, and evil spirits even, and sneers at magicians and even mediums (the few honest ones), is an academical imposture" (Wade 228). When believers affirmed the unity of nature and spirit, the skeptical half of Yeats asked for a visible manifestation of the invisible,

---

[5]"Per Amica Silentia Lunae," in Essays (N. Y., 1924), pp. 523-4. Future citations of "Per Amica" will refer to this publication and be abbreviated PASL in the text.

a magical synthesis of actual and ideal, forgetting perhaps that the invisible may not be the spiritual and that mystics like Blake, whom he so much admired, would never have postulated the natural as possessing a self-sufficient existence opposed to the spiritual. To the Irish poet, the doctrines of the alchemists were no chemical fantasy, "but a philosophy they applied to the world, to the elements, and to man himself."[6] He discovered that "they sought to fashion gold out of common metals merely as part of a universal transmutation of all things into some divine and imperishable substance" (M 267). Alchemy seemed to be "the gradual distillation of the contents of the soul, until they are ready to put off the mortal and put on the immortal" (M 283-4), seeking "a mystical union with the multitude who govern the world and time" (M 273). This discovery enabled him to make his writings "a fanciful reverie over the transmutation of life into art, and a cry of measureless desire for a world made wholly of essences" (M 267).

The figures in Yeats's early mythological stories are men consumed by just such an insatiable desire. Outlaws, rebels, various types of artists, thinkers, and old men, they are driven to leave their home and devote their lives to a search for something indefinable, some "Great Secret" of a deeper meaning to life. They dream of a limitless

---

[6]Mythologies (N. Y., 1959), p. 267. Future references to this collection will be abbreviated M in the text.

energy, a permanent beauty, an eternal youth, a love experience remaining always at its height and unaccompanied by any fatigue, a perfectly satisfying religious ritual.

None of them, of course, is successful in his quest. In "The Heart of the Spring" an old man yearns for the Great Secret; he has never been happy because youth and manhood pass away. Seeking for the knowledge that will transform him into a "god of the land" he reads in a Hebrew manuscript that "there is a moment after the Sun has entered the Ram and before he has passed the Lion, which trembles with the Song of the Immortal Powers, and that whosoever finds this moment and listens to the Song shall become like the Immortal Powers themselves" (M 174). He returns to Ireland and asks the faery men and cow-doctors if they know when this moment occurs, "but though all had heard of it, there was none could find the moment upon the hour-glass. So I gave myself to magic. . . ." (M 174). Finally the moment draws near. In gathering the plants accessory to his magical invocations, the old man's assistant notices that the flowers, the trees, and the night itself seem fused with an imperishable beauty.

> It was one of those nights when everything seems carved of precious stones. Sleuth Wood away to the south looked as though cut out of green beryl, and the waters that mirrored it shone like pale opal. The roses he was gathering were like glowing rubies, and the lilies had the dull luster of pearl. Everything had taken on itself the look of something imperishable. . . .
>
> M 175

The ecstatic moment approaches, and the Song is begun. "Gradually the birds began to sing, and when the last grains of sand were falling, everything suddenly seemed to overflow with their music. It was the most beautiful and living moment of the year; one could listen to the spring's heart beating in it" (M 175-6). As the thrush begins its song the old man is found dead.

Apparently the song the old man wants to hear is equivalent to death. The meaning of this "death" is clarified by commentary elsewhere in the Mythologies:

> What else can death be but the beginning of wisdom and power and beauty? and foolishness may be a kind of death. . . . The self, which is the foundation of our knowledge, is broken in pieces by foolishness. . . . Wisdom and beauty and power may sometimes, I think, come to those who die every day they live. . . . Because the soul always believes in these things, or in like things [mythological stories], the cell and the wilderness shall never long be empty, or lovers come into the world who will not understand the verse: --
>
> Heardst thou not sweet words among
> That heaven-resounding minstrelsy?
> Heardst thou not that those who die
> Awake in a world of ecstasy?
> That love, when limbs are interwoven,
> And sleep, when the night of life is cloven,
> And thought, to the world's dim boundaries clinging,
> And music, when one beloved is singing,
> Is death?
>
> M 115-6

It is suggested that the death suffered by the old man is symbolic of the type of self-surrender and loss of identity prerequisite to any self-transcendence. Aside from this meaning, however, there is a strong intimation that the long-sought world of essences is not to be found on earth.

The questing hero of Yeats's early poetry is consistently driven to reject the actual or mortal world in order to reach the spiritual or imaginative one. Forgael of The Shadowy Waters thinks that perhaps where the world ends he can find that unchanging ecstasy, the realization of the dream shared by all true lovers of complete union, a dream unfulfillable on earth where, as Yeats often said, the tragedy of love is the perpetual virginity of the soul. Forgael hopes that with a woman of the Everliving he shall

> light upon a place in the world's core
> Where passion grows to be a changeless thing,
> Like charmed apples made of chrysoprase,
> Or chrysoberyl, or beryl, or chrysolite;
> And there, in juggleries of sight and sense,
> Become one movement, energy, delight,
> Until the overburthened moon is dead.
>
> CP 412

His sailors believe that their master is journeying toward his death on the waste seas, and they prove to be right. Forgael himself had known that only at the world's end can the mind be made unchanging enough to find "Miracle, ecstasy, the impossible hope."

In Yeats's early poems any apocalypse, if attainable at all, is thought of either as a return to a soft, beautiful, dreamy era in an aristocratic past, or else to be achieved by the destruction of the world. The Happy Townland is the world's bane. The man who dreams of faeryland hears the fish sing about "a woven world-forgotten isle / Where people love beside the ravelled seas. . . ." (CP 42),

and cannot rest easy even in the grave because the worms proclaim "That God has laid His fingers on the sky, / That from those fingers glittering summer runs / Upon the dancer by the dreamless wave." He can find no comfort until "God burn Nature with a kiss," or until Nature is consumed. (We cannot interpret this "burning kiss" as a world-transformation or as a conjunction between natural and supernatural because we are told the fish sing about a "world-forgotten isle.") The speaker of "The Indian to His Love" describes a retreat like the Lake-Isle of Innisfree where he and his beloved will

> moor our lonely ship
> And wander ever with woven hands,
> Murmuring softly lip to lip,
> Along the grass, along the sands,
> Murmuring how far away are the unquiet lands . . .
>
> CP 14

The "unquiet lands" are still there, however, and the couple who flee to this nostalgically conceived dream oasis cannot escape from the knowledge that dream and reality have not been made to intersect. "Time and the world are ever in flight" from the hill where "God stands winding his lonely horn" (CP 57). In "The Secret Rose" Yeats asks for an apocalypse but in such a way, surely, as not to encourage its coming:

> Far-off, most secret and inviolate Rose,
> Enfold me in my hour of hours; where those
> Who sought thee in the Holy Sepulchre,
> Or in the wine-vat, dwell beyond the stir

And tumult of defeated dreams; and deep
Among pale eyelids, heavy with the sleep
Men have named beauty. . . .
. . . . . .
I, too, await
The hour of thy great wind of love and hate.
When shall the stars be blown about the sky,
Like the sparks blown out of a smithy, and die?
Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows,
Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose?

CP 27

Beauty is a sleep, a dream; the Rose is supposed to wrap the supplicator in a womb-like security; and after such a languid, sentimental, pre-Raphaelitic invocation, who can believe that he really wants or even expects such a violent visitation as would blow the stars about the sky?

The moment of moments is not truly expected to occur partly because the aspirant suffers from the delusion that the natural world must be destroyed, the stars after being blown about like sparks must die. Paul Ruttledge of Yeats's play, Where There is Nothing, similarly insists that "We must destroy the World; we must destroy everything that has Law and Number, for where there is nothing, there is God."[7] He has realized that "one needs a religion so wholly supernatural, that is so opposed to the order of nature that the world can never capture it."[8] We are

---

[7]Quoted by Alex Zwerdling, "W. B. Yeats: Variations on the Visionary Quest," in Yeats: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. John Unterecker (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963), p. 87. This article was reprinted from the University of Toronto Quarterly, XXX (Oct. '60).

[8]Ibid. See also Yeats's play, The Unicorn from the Stars, which is very similar in theme, structure, and phraseology.

reminded of the aestheticism of Villiers de L'Isle Adam when in "The Tables of the Law" Owen Aherne describes the alleged doctrines of Joachim of Flora:

> Joachim of Flora acknowledged openly the authority of the Church, and even asked that all his published writings, and those to be published by his desire after his death, should be submitted to the censorship of the Pope. He considered that those whose work was to live and not to reveal were children and that the Pope was their father; but he taught in secret that certain others, and always in increasing numbers, were elected, not to live, but to reveal that hidden substance of God which is colour and music and softness and a sweet odour; and that these have no father but the Holy Spirit. Just as poets and painters and musicians labour at their works, building them with lawless and lawful things alike, so long as they embody the beauty that is beyond the grave, these children of the Holy Spirit labour at their moments with eyes upon the shining substance on which Time has heaped the refuse of creation; for the world only exists to be a tale in the ears of coming generations; and terror and content, birth and death, love and hatred, and the fruit of the Tree, are but instruments for that supreme art which is to win us from life and gather us into eternity like doves into their dove-cots.
>
> M 300-301

Agreeing with Joachim, thus Owen Aherne, and to some extent his creator Yeats, link artists with a secret priesthood who have rejected the world in order to "embody the beauty that is beyond the grave." As a young man Yeats was distressed by what seemed to him the impossibility of experiencing the absolute in mortal life. Only by means of dream and trance, by the symbolism of poetry and the other arts, he thought, may one communicate with the supernatural. In Lady Gregory's Ideals in Ireland he wrote, "It may be that poetry is the utterance of desires that we can only

satisfy in dreams, and that if all our dreams were satisfied there would be no more poetry."[9] Owen Aherne through his speculations about alchemy and mysticism has developed "a fanciful hatred of all life," and declares that "the beautiful arts were sent into the world to overthrow nations, and finally life herself, by sowing everywhere unlimited desires, like torches thrown into a burning city" (M 294).

Yeats was to come to see that if poetry has the powers he claimed for it due to its employment of symbolism and the correspondence between details in the phenomenal universe and the supernatural universe, there can be no such dichotomy between "this world" and the "other world," and one may communicate with the supernatural through the natural, appreciate the macrocosm through a true perception of the microcosm, or in other words the rejection of the natural world is not only unnecessary but also a hindrance to the achieving of a unified vision of reality. Yeats's best poetry was written with the conviction that "natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed" (CP 283), and that "all things hang like a drop of dew / Upon a blade of grass" (CP 249).

Even before developing his theory of symbolism, Yeats realized that literature could be made to perform some of the functions of religion. Since the skepticism of his

---

[9]Quoted by Morton Irving Seiden in William Butler Yeats: The Poet as a Mythmaker (Michigan, 1962), p. 4.

father and his intellectual milieu made the doctrine of organized religion a dead hypothesis for him, he had turned to myths for the embodiment of truth. In his autobiography, Yeats says that he had been very religious, and, at the age of fifteen or sixteen,

> deprived by Huxley and Tindall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible church, of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians. . . . I had even created a dogma: "Because those imaginary people are created out of the deepest instinct of man, to be his measure and his norm, whatever I can imagine those mouths speaking may be the nearest I can go to truth." When I listened they seemed to speak of one thing only: they, their loves, every incident of their lives, were steeped in the supernatural.[10]

When the young poet first joined his hermetic society, he proposed for their consideration "that whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to an affirmative religion, and that their mythology, their spirits of water and wind were but literal truth" (A 55).

He understood that myths deal with the essential in human life, the permanent and recurring, and as such are the most fitting subjects for the poet-priest; in "The Autumn of the Body" he declares his belief that "the arts are about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have

---

[10] Autobiography (N. Y., 1953), p. 71. Future citations from the Autobiography in the text will refer to this edition and be abbreviated A.

fallen from the shoulders of priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essences of things, and not with things" (E & I 193). His study of mythology acquainted Yeats with its role as sacred narrative in the rituals of primitive peoples,[11] and with the relationship of legends and folk-tales to the religions of ancient man: "Rhys and many more have made us see in all these things [fables and fairytales], old beautiful mythologies wherein ancient man said symbolically all he knew about God and man's soul, once famous religions fallen into ruin and turned into old wives' tales, but still luminous from the rosy dawn of human revery."[12] He even wanted to create his own theurgic and typically eclectic mythology as part of the mystery of a new religious order; in his Autobiography Yeats writes about a castle which took his fancy:

> I planned a mystical order which should buy or hire the castle, and keep it as a place for contemplation, and where we might establish mysteries like those of Eleusis and Samothrace; and for ten years to come my most impassioned thought was a vain attempt to find philosophy and create ritual for that order. I had an unshakeable conviction, arising how or whence I cannot tell, that invisible gates would open as they opened for Swedenborg, as they opened for Blake, as they opened for Boehme, and that this philosophy would find its manuals of devotion in all imaginative literature, and set before Irishmen for special manual an Irish literature which, though made by many minds, would seem the work of a single mind, and turn our

---

[11]The terminology here is borrowed from Seiden, Myth-Maker, p. 7.

[12]Letters to the New Island (Cambridge, Mass., 1934), p. 101.

> places of beauty or legendary association into holy symbols. I did not think that this philosophy would be altogether pagan, for it was plain that its symbols must be selected from all those things that had moved men during many, mostly Christian, centuries.
>
> A 153

Yeats expected that his ritual and mythology would open the invisible doors by means of the magic charm of symbols; could he light on the proper symbol, his mythological philosophy would have the sacred characteristics of religious truth. He was convinced that, called down by means of the right image, the truth would descend to him in a moment of passionate experience. He identified the revelation of reality with the experience of ecstasy, and believed that the pursuit of art is a religious activity. No poet, he writes, has ever had mere pleasure for his end, nor has any poet he has ever heard of been a sentimentalist:

> Johnson and Dowden, friends of my youth, were dissipated men, the one a drunkard, the other a drunkard and mad about women, and yet they had the gravity of men who had found life out and were awaking from the dream; and both, one in life and art and one in art and less in life, had a continual preoccupation with religion. . . . The sentimentalists are practical men who believe in money, in position, in a marriage-bell, and whose understanding of happiness is to be so busy, whether at work or play, that all is forgotten but the momentary aim. They find their pleasure in a cup that is filled from Lethe's wharf, and for the awakening, for the vision, for the revelation of reality, tradition offers us a different word--ecstasy.
>
> PASL 493

At first Yeats thought that revelation comes from a source outside the self. Alone in his room, musing on poetic tales, he seems the sole creator of his discoveries

until the toil of putting them in rhyme convinces him otherwise:

> How could I have mistaken for myself an heroic condition that from early boyhood has made me superstitious? That which comes as complete, as minutely organised, as are those elaborate, brightly lighted buildings and sceneries appearing in a moment, as I lie between sleeping and awaking, must come from above me and beyond me.
>
> PASL 486

The reader who is well acquainted with Yeats realizes that his characterization of himself as "superstitious" is a typical evasion of this most undogmatic poet; we may substitute "religious" in its place.

In his Autobiography Yeats again suggests that knowledge enters the mind from beyond. Considering the possibility of a Unity of Culture to be evoked by Unity of Image, he does not turn to books for help,

> for I believed that the truth I sought would come to me like the subject of a poem, from some moment of passionate experience, and that if I filled my exposition with other men's thought, other men's investigation, I would sink into all that multiplicity of interest and opinion. That passionate experience could never come . . . until I had found the right image or images. . . . When a man writes any work of genius, or invents some creative action, is it not because some knowledge or power has come into his mind from beyond his mind? It is called up by an image. . . .
>
> 162-4

Although revelation is not from the personal self, it is from the Self, or antithetical self, whose home is in the Anima Mundi, the collective psyche of humanity, but also a transcendent entity to which Yeats later attributed the

traditional characteristics of deity. In his Autobiography Yeats continues to explain:

> I know now that revelation is from the self, but from that age-long memoried self, that shapes the elaborate shell of the mollusc and the child in the womb, that teaches the birds to make their nest, and that genius is a crisis that joins that buried self for certain moments to our trivial daily mind.
>
> 164

Again, in "Anima Hominis," he identifies the "other self" as the source of inspiration, when, discussing the religious preoccupations of poets, he declares that "the other self, the antiself or antithetical self, as one may choose to name it, comes but to those who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality" (PASL 493).

By the time he completed the second version (1937) of A Vision, Yeats had located "reality" in the thirteenth cone of his system, a cone which is in actuality a sphere, because sufficient to itself, but must appear in conical shape to man because he is bound to the antinomies.[13] In Pages From a Diary Written in 1930 the thirteenth cone is equated with God:

> Berkeley in the Commonplace Book thought that 'we perceive' and are passive whereas God creates in perceiving. He creates what we perceive. I substitute for God the Thirteenth Cone, the Thirteenth Cone therefore creates our perceptions--all the visible world--as held in common by our wheel.[14]

---

[13]Future references in the text to A Vision will be to this edition, published in N. Y. in 1938, and will be abbreviated V.

[14]Reprinted in Explorations (N. Y., 1962), p. 320. All future references to any material contained in this collection will be abbreviated Ex.

While immanent in the phenomenal universe this sphere is also transcendent to it, and is the home of Daimons and Ghostly Selves (antithetical selves and permanent, individual selves or archetypal egos), and thus embodies the Anima Mundi. Although everything in the phenomenal universe and in Anima Mundi exists because it is a thought in the mind of God (see V 247), reality is also constituted by human consciousness (V 187), which may or may not present a paradox. Expression of Daemonic thought, as in poetry, is most easily achieved by a man who has attained Unity of Being, sometimes a psychological harmony and sometimes a balanced tension of opposites.

A full understanding of Yeats's terminology would require a lengthy investigation of his philosophical system, but we may see that the Thirteenth Sphere is the source of both mystical and aesthetic experience, and that Yeats believes the mystic and the poet are of a very similar temperament. We learn in A Vision that the Thirteenth Cycle or Cone

> is that cycle which may deliver us from the twelve cycles of time and space. The cone which intersects ours is a cone in so far as we think of it as the antithesis to our thesis, but if the time has come for our deliverance it is the phaseless sphere, sometimes called the Thirteenth Sphere, for every lesser cycle contains within itself, as it were, the reflection or messenger of the final deliverance. Within it live all souls that have been set free and every Daimon and Ghostly Self; our expanding cone seems to cut through its gyre; spiritual influx is from its circumference, animate life from its centre.
>
> 210-11

For fleeting moments before our final deliverance we may enjoy a phaseless state of self-fulfillment and complete freedom, a reflection of that to come. As Yeats points out in some notes for A Vision, this transcendence may be achieved in art:

> At first we are subject to Destiny . . . but the point in the Zodiac where the whirl becomes a sphere once reached, we may escape from the constraint of our nature and from that of external things, entering upon a state where all fuel has become flame, where there is nothing but the state itself, nothing to constrain it or end it. We attain it always in the creation or enjoyment of a work of art, but that moment passes from us because it is not an attainment of our whole being. Philosophy has always explained its moment of moments in much the same way; nothing can be added to it, nothing taken away; that all progressions are full of illusion, that everything is born there like a ship in full sail.[15]

The Unity of Being thus attained in a moment of intensity is not merely the effect of the pursuit of art; it is also its primary purpose. The artist and the saint, as Yeats repeatedly declares in all his prose work, renounce the goals of ordinary life that they may enjoy the overflowing peace of life as pure energy, pure contemplation, pure beauty. Discussing possible criterions of great literature, he writes:

> But if literature has no external test, how are we to know that it is indeed literature? The only test that Nature gives us, to show when we obey her, is that she gives us happiness, and when we are no longer obedient she brings us to pain sooner or later. Is it not the same with the artist? The sign that she makes to him is that happiness we call

---

[15]Quoted by Richard Ellmann in The Identity of Yeats (N. Y., 1954), p. 221.

> delight in beauty. . . . Indeed, is it not that delight in beauty which tells the artist that he has imagined what may never die, itself but a delight in the permanent yet ever-changing form of life, in her very limbs and lineaments? When life has given it, has she given anything but herself? Has she any other reward, even for the saints? If one flees to the wilderness, is not that clear light that falls about the soul when all irrelevant things have been taken away, but life that has been about one always, enjoyed in all its fullness at length? It is as though she had put her arms about one, crying 'My beloved, you have given up everything for me.' If a man spend all his days in good works till there is no emotion in his heart that is not full of virtue, is not the reward he prays for eternal life? The artist, too, has prayers and a cloister, and if he do not turn away from temporary things, from the zeal of the reformer and the passion of revolution, that jealous mistress will give him but a scornful glance.
>
> Ex 152-3

According to Yeats, the artist's quest for truth and perfection is identical with the saint's, at least in object and reward, if not in path:

> He [the artist] must make his work a part of his journey towards beauty and truth. He must picture saint or hero, or hillside, as he sees them, not as he is expected to see them, and he must comfort himself, when others cry out against what he has seen, by remembering that no two men are alike. . . . He may, indeed, doubt the reality of his vision if men do not quarrel with him as they did with the Apostles, for there is only one perfection and only one search for perfection, and it sometimes has the form of the religious life and sometimes of the artistic life; and I do not think these lives differ in their wages, for 'The end of life is peace.'
>
> E & I 207

Just as the artist may gauge his success by the aesthetic delight he enjoys during the creative process, so may the appreciator judge a work of art by the intensity of life it embodies. Yeats himself always demanded of a work of art that it produce a transcendent experience or

vision in a moment of intense life; in a letter to Charles Ricketts he describes some tales of Lady Gregory which he much admires:

> Those strange tales, with that curious wildness of theirs which is their compensation for lacking classic measure, and their sense of fine life, of a life that was lifted everywhere into beauty, are the energies, I think, behind all our movement here. I notice that when anybody here writes a play it always works out, whatever the ideas of the writer, into a cry for a more abundant and a more intense life.
>
> Wade 436

He read Joyce's Ulysses when it appeared in serial form in the Little Review, and that he recognized and appreciated what the younger Irishman called his "epiphanies" is evident in a letter to John Quinn:

> His [Joyce's] new story in the Little Review looks like becoming the best work he has done. It is an entirely new thing--neither what the eye sees nor the ear hears, but what the rambling mind thinks and imagines from moment to moment. He has certainly surpassed in intensity any novelist of our time. . . .
>
> Wade 651

It is clear that Yeats considered his role as a poet closely akin to that of a religious devotee, sometimes more like a prophet, proclaiming a new divinity, sometimes more like a mystic, renouncing all, even the desire of salvation, that he may attain unity with a transcendent truth, and again, sometimes like a priest, who acts as mediator between God and man and by means of 'magical' ritual may compell the spiritual to walk on earth. Certainly his poetry is full of symbols borrowed from religious ritual, and an

early essay, "Speaking to the Psaltery," urges that his poetry be chanted. Even here he cannot resist the idea of an elect group of believers practicing a mysterious and lofty art, an Order, perhaps, "naming itself from the Golden Violet of the Troubadors or the like, and having among its members none but well-taught and well-mannered speakers who will keep the new art from disrepute" (E & I 19). It is said that Yeats himself always chanted his poems,[16] and in the recordings he made for the British Broadcasting Company, some of which are reissued by Caedmon Records, many of them are intoned like prayers. It is in keeping with his view that in the letter to Pound which prefaces his geometrical system in A Vision, he writes, "I send you the introduction of a book which will, when finished, proclaim a new divinity" (27). Rapallo, where the book was written, is compared to a sacred shrine: "Descartes went on pilgrimage to some shrine of the Virgin when he made his first philosophical discovery, and the mountain road from Rapallo to Zoagli seems like something in my own mind, something that I have discovered" (7).

In a letter to his father in 1913 Yeats wrote, "All our art is but the putting our faith and the evidence of our faith into words or forms and our faith is in ecstasy" (Wade 583). Previously he had admitted that he had given up his life to poetry, "broken [his] life in a mortar, as

---

[16]Seiden, Mythmaker, p. 287.

it were" (Wade 84), that he might shape it into art, and affirmed that the mystical life was the center of all he did and thought and wrote (Wade 211). The question arises, if the poet is so similar to the mystic, both in life and in reward, if he follows a similar course of renunciation to gain the same end, the experience, at once noetic and partially incommunicable, of transcendence, unity, fulfillment, perfection, then how may we differentiate between the poet and the mystic? For surely there is a difference that even Yeats cannot forget, and, although he averred that the mystical life was the center of all he did, he never knew the total affirmation of the true mystic, but frequently turned to magic and other devices for an empirical test of spiritual truths. An investigation of Yeats's view of the poet and the mystic would, by clarifying his view of himself and the artist's role, the subject of so much of his poetry, aid greatly in illuminating his work.

CHAPTER II

THE POET AND THE SAINT

The four primary characteristics of mystical states of consciousness as William James outlines them in The Varieties of Religious Experience are ineffability, transiency, passivity, and a noetic quality.[17] Having examined a number of cases, he finds that the subject of such states of consciousness usually describes his experience in negative terms, saying that the state defies expression, that "no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical states are more like states of feeling than states of intellect."[18] The individual to whom they come tends to refer to what he thinks of as the Supreme Absolute by the negative of all adjectives, for no adjective will properly describe it, so far does it surpass everything else. Although a mystical experience may be regarded as a state of feeling, it also seems to be a state of knowledge for the subject, who is granted "insight into

---

[17] N. Y., 1958, p. 293.

[18] Ibid.

depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect."[19] Religious mystics often undergo a prolonged period of discipline and preparation for this cosmic consciousness, but the state cannot be methodically induced by any series of operations or actions; one can only make oneself fit to receive it when it comes: "Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations . . . yet when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power."[20]

The most notable aspect of the mystical state of consciousness is that the subject generally feels united with an Absolute. The mind in this state feels that its consciousness has been enlarged and freed and at the same time unified or put at peace. Usually the mystic has practiced a renunciation of desires and worldly interests that he may find the detached contemplation necessarily precedent to the experience of union. In other words, the concepts of unity," "God," and "discipline" are vital to an understanding of mysticism.

Many mystics have outlined the stages along the way to union; although their paths show marked similarity, they also diverge sufficiently to indicate that there is no

---

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

single true mystic way. For our purposes it would be most useful to consider the common Hindu way as Yeats outlines it in two introductions to translations from sacred Indian literature, his introduction to The Holy Mountain, the story of a pilgrimage and an initiation, and his introduction to The Mandukya Upanishad. Both essays present the stages in similar terms; one merely clarifies the other.

According to the Mandukya Upanishad, as Yeats explains it, the soul knows four states of being:

> the waking state corresponding to the letter 'A', where physical objects are present; the dreaming state, corresponding to the letter 'U', where mental objects are present; the state of dreamless sleep corresponding to the letter 'M', where all seems darkness to the soul, because all there is lost in Brahma, creator of mental and physical objects; the final state corresponding to the whole sacred word 'Aum', consciousness bound to no object, bliss bound to no aim, Turiya, pure personality.
>
> E & I 457

The four states of the soul also correspond to the stages of the mystic journey as it is described in The Holy Mountain. The attention is first fixed upon some object or image as the theme of meditation. Next, the "theme and thought, fact and idea," draw together, transforming each other until they attain an identity that "recalls the description of dreams in the Upanishads" (E & I 462). The third stage is Sushupti, unconscious Samadhi, in which everything has disappeared but this identity, and the self is entirely forgotten. In the fourth stage, the mind, plunged in conscious Samadhi, may at will enter any of the previous states

or all of them simultaneously. Whereas in the deep sleep of "M" the soul was united to the Self that is the creator and source of all, the state designated by "Aum," comprehending all stages, is the Self itself--the fourth stage is the conflagration of the union of Self and Not-Self found in the third state. "Full Turiya . . . comes when all these states are as a single timeless act, and that act is pure or unimpeded personality, all existence brought into the words: 'I am'." (E & I 462). The mind in conscious or "seedless" Samadhi has "passed beyond generation that is rooted always in the unconscious" (E & I 477), and, entering various states at will, "joyous, unobstructed, it can transform itself , dissolve itself, create itself" (E & I 477).

Yeats's treatment of the Upanishads is in many ways indicative of his own thought. At times he had two contradictory concepts of reality, of the One and of the Many.

> I think that two conceptions, that of reality as a congeries of beings, that of reality as a single being, alternate in our emotions and in history, and must always remain something that human reason, because subject always to one or the other, cannot reconcile. I am always, in all that I do, driven to a moment which is the realisation of myself as unique and free, or to a moment which is the surrender to God of all that I am.
>
> Ex 305

Although human reason cannot find a reconciliation between the One and the Many, a coherent unity may be perceived in apocalyptic or artistic vision. In Yeats's own Vision, the antinomies are reflections from the one symbol (240), though paradoxically, his unifying symbol is one of eternal

conflict, the harmony of the dance of opposites. He did occasionally find a total resolution of conflict into universal unity:

> For one throb of the artery,
> While on that old grey stone I sat
> Under the old wind-broken tree,
> I knew that One is animate,
> Mankind inanimate phantasy.
>
> CP 187-8

However, apocalyptic vision was very rarely vouchsafed to Yeats; he usually saw existence in terms of conflict, and his greatest achievement was in the formation of an artistic whole out of discordant elements. He tended to believe that conflict is basic to the very structure of things; in a letter to Sturge Moore he wrote:

> If Kant is right the antinomy is in our method of reasoning but if the Platonists are right may one not think that the antinomy is itself constitutive and that the consciousness by which we know ourselves and exist is itself irrational?[21]

Reality, it seemed, is a unity only as a set of competing gyres may form a prismatic whole, or as interpenetrating cones may, in some state beyond time or in which all times are enacted simultaneously, come together in a homogeneous sphere. In A Vision Yeats discusses Empedocles' view:

> "When Discord," writes Empedocles, "has fallen into the lowest depths of the vortex"--the extreme bound, not the centre, Burnet points out--"Concord has reached the centre, into it do all things come together so as to be only one, not all at once but gradually from different quarters, and as they come

---

[21]Quoted by Hazard Adams, The Structure of Myth in the Poetry of William Blake and W. B. Yeats, (University of Washington, 1953), p. 5. Microfilmed dissertation.

> Discord retires to the extreme boundary . . . in proportion as it runs out Concord in a soft immortal boundless stream runs in." And again: "Never will boundless time be emptied of that pair; and they prevail in turn as that circle comes round; and pass away before one another and increase in their appointed turn."
>
> 67

Thus, even Concord and Discord, order and disorder, unity and disunity, play their role in a patterned conflict, so long as time prevails. Yeats cannot even be accused of finding a universal truth, or element of unity, in the prevalence of disunity; on the other hand, as he would be the first to insist, in his system disunity and conflict hold sway only under the most orderly and uniform conditions. It should be added, however, that there is some hint that the order is more imposed or created than merely discovered. It is difficult for the reader to determine to what extent Yeats thought the pattern he discussed in A Vision was his own creation and to what extent inherent in objective reality--for two reasons, that Yeats himself kept changing his mind, and that he leaned toward the idealist and solipsist position that all reality is in the mind of the individual, which somehow corresponds to the mind of God. For evidence that he considered his system as a form of art and constructed it at least partly for the sake of his art, we may consider his statement that the "instructors" of the Vision (spirits from the other world or the messengers of his subconscious) came to give him metaphors for poetry (V 8), and a letter to his father about Per Amica Silentia Lunae, first

titled An Alphabet, and the prolegomenon to A Vision:

> Much of your thought resembles mine in An Alphabet but mine is part of a religious system more or less logically worked out, a system which I hope will interest you as a form of poetry. I find the setting it all in order has helped my verse, has given me a new framework and new patterns. One goes on year after year gradually getting the disorder of one's mind in order and this is the real impulse to create.
>
> Wade 627

The problem of the human ego and human freedom versus God's omnipotence and omniscience is an antinomy of special concern to Yeats. He has been called a pantheist,[22] since he equated the universal mind with the mind of God, but it is also true that although he felt deists generally too much emphasized the gulf between God and the human consciousness, he was equally sure that pantheism left insufficient room for the human ego (see Ex, "Diary Written in 1930" passim). We remember that in Per Amica Silentia Lunae, discussing the effect of rhythmic sequence, Yeats had equated the climactic moment of the sequence with complete self-possession (see above pp. 6-7). Whereas the typical Western religious mystic thinks of ecstasy as a total self-surrender, Yeats usually considers any type of ecstasy as a self-fulfillment. It is clear, however, that he merely takes a different view of the same thing. Discussing tragedy in Dramatis Personae, he writes:

---

[22]Thomas Parkinson, W. B. Yeats: The Later Poetry (Berkeley, Cal., 1964), p. 11.

> A poet creates tragedy from . . . that soul which is alike in all men. It has not joy, as we understand that word, but ecstasy, which is from the contemplation of things vaster than the individual and imperfectly seen, perhaps, by all those that still live. The masks of tragedy contain neither character nor personal energy. They are allied to decoration and to the abstract figures of Egyptian temples. Before the mind can look out of their eyes the active will perishes, hence their sorrowful calm. Joy is of the will which labors, which overcomes obstacles, which knows triumph. The soul knows its changes of state alone, and I think that the motives of tragedy are not related to action but to changes of state. I feel this but do not see clearly, for I am hunting truth into its thicket and it is my business to keep close to the impressions of sense, to common daily life. Yet is not ecstasy some fulfillment of the soul in itself, some slow or sudden expansion of it like an overflowing well? Is not this what is meant by beauty?[23]

The audience of an ideal tragedy abandons its personal will, its set of personal identities, and becomes united to the deeper Self held in common. The self-surrender is of accidental personality; the self-realisation is of the essential identity corresponding to the God in man. Usually Yeats thinks that the relationship between human and divine freedom may best be considered as an antinomy; in explanation he would probably say that only in extraordinary moments may one perceive their identity. In Pages From a Diary Written in 1930 he remarks:

> If men are born many times, as I think, that must originate in the antinomy between human and divine freedom. Man incarnating, translating the 'divine ideas' into his language of the eye, to assert his

---

[23]N. Y., 1936, p. 95-6. This book has since been reprinted as part of the Autobiography. Future citations of Dramatis Personae in the text will refer to the 1936 edition and be abbreviated DP.

> own freedom, dying into the freedom of God and then coming to birth again.
>
> Ex 306

The same idea appears in his plays on religious subjects; the last spoken words of The Resurrection are, "God and man die each other's life, live each other's death."[24] In his diary notes of 1930 he doubts that the conflict will ever be resolved:

> Plotinus calls well-nigh the most beautiful of Enneads The Impassivity of the Disembodied but, as he was compelled to at his epoch, thought of man as reabsorbed into God's freedom as final reality. The ultimate reality must be all movement, all thought, all perception extinguished, two freedoms unthinkably, unimaginably absorbed in one another. Surely if either circuit, that which carries us into man or that which carries us into God, were reality, the generation had long since found its term.
>
> Ex 307

In the Upanishads Yeats found a structure much closer to that of his own than he had discovered in any other body of doctrine, and he recognized a way of considering the antinomy between God and man that would allow at once for man's ultimate freedom and God's transcendence.

> Only the later Upanishads, according to certain scholars, were aware of the soul's rebirth. They substituted the doctrine of Karma for sacrifice and ritual purgation. . . . Instead of a levelling pantheism came innumerable souls, no two sould alike, a belief that nothing else exists or that nothing exists, a doctrine first taught not by priest but by king, a discipline that seemed always aristocratic, solitary, and antithetical.
>
> V 260

As Yeats interprets it, Hindu philosophy comes very close to agreeing with him in his theories of the Anima Mundi,

---

[24] Collected Plays (N. Y., 1953), p. 373.

the divine nature of the human consciousness, and the mental nature of reality. According to the Upanishads, human personality is both unique and at one with God; in fact, God is the Self, realized in moments of intense contemplation. "In pure personality, seedless Samadhi, there is nothing but that bare "I am' which is Brahma" (E & I 483), and the initiate finds himself reflected everywhere in the whole universe (E & I 481). Thus the Thirteenth Sphere, home of the Ghostly Selves (more or less equivalent to the conventional "soul" of religion), is also the "universal Self" of Hindu philosophy, and the concept of Unity of Being takes on a new dimension. Commenting on the Mandukya Upanishad, Yeats says, "The initiate, all old Karma exhausted, is the 'Human Form Divine' of Blake, that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body; henceforth he is self-creating" (E & I 483). And about a year before he died Yeats declared:

> I was born into this faith, have lived in it, and shall die in it; my Christ, a legitimate deduction from the Creed of St. Patrick, as I think, is that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body, Blake's 'Imagination,' what the Upanishads have named 'Self': nor is this unity distant and therefore intellectually understandable, but imminent, differing from man to man and age to age, taking upon itself pain and ugliness, 'eye of newt, and toe of frog.'
>
> E & I 518

As one critic has pointed out, from this point of view God "looms as the absolute idealization of the psychic life of mankind. The origin and measurement of the entire

phenomenal universe, Yeats implies, are to be sought in the imagination of the poet and non-poet alike."[25]

The implications for poetry and the role of the poet are enormous. Going back to the account of the four states of the soul, we may now attempt an interpretation of them as stages of the creative process or the aesthetic experience. The first step is the selection of some object or image as the theme of meditation; the second is the mutual transformation of theme and thought, fact and idea. Is this anything else but the ascribing of a symbolic value to the object of meditation? Yeats himself describes the approach toward union of thought and theme as "the dreamer creating his dream, the sculptor toiling to set free the imprisoned image" (E & I 477). As we have seen, to Yeats the possibility of symbolic art depended upon the existence of the Anima Mundi, a sort of reservoir of truth, and he thought that the success of any creative endeavor would require belief in a type of immortality of the soul.

> Every argument carries us backwards to some religious conception, and in the end the creative energy of men depends upon their believing that they have, within themselves, something immortal and imperishable, and that all else is but as an image in a looking glass. So long as that belief is not a formal thing, a man will create out of a joyful energy, seeking little for any external test of an impulse that may be sacred, and looking for no foundation outside life itself. If Ireland could escape from those phantoms of hers she might create, as did the old writers; for she has a

---

[25]Seiden, Mythmaker, p. 123.

> faith that is as theirs, and keeps alive . . . a portion of the old imaginative life.
>
> Ex 151

It is important to notice that the vitality of the imaginative life is linked with a faith in immortality in such a way that we need not conclude Yeats thought art required a belief in personal immortality; he makes a distinction between religious feeling and the systematization of belief, such that the successful artist, instead of looking for a "foundation outside life itself," creates with the joyful energy due to the perception of the permanent in life. By means of symbols he may escape from the purely personal, the purely subjective, the purely temporal, and enter upon a timeless, objective world:

> It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings besides the one or two the writer lays an emphasis upon, or the half-score that he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of Nature. The poet of essences and pure ideas must seek in the half-lights that glimmer from symbol to symbol as if to the ends of the earth, all that the epic and dramatic poet find of mystery and shadow in the accidental circumstances of life.
>
> E & I 87

In the third stage of contemplation according to the Hindu way, personal identity is submerged in a communion with all. The union of theme and thought is "so complete that there is nothing more to do, nothing left but statue and dream; the sculptor has gone, the dreamer has gone, there is nobody even to remember that statue and

dream are there; the mind is plunged in Sushupti, unconscious Samadhi" (E & I 477). Perhaps the furthest Yeats ever goes in drawing a direct comparison between the mystic and aesthetic ways is in "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry":

> I imagine that when he wrote his earlier poems he allowed the subconscious life to lay its hands so firmly upon the rudder of his imagination that he was little conscious of the abstract meaning of the images that rose in what seemed the idleness of his mind. Any one who has any experience of any mystical state of the soul knows how there float up in the mind profound symbols, whose meaning . . . one does not perhaps understand for years. Nor I think has any one, who has known that experience with any constancy, failed to find some day, in some old book or on some old monument, a strange or intricate image that had floated up before him, and to grow perhaps dizzy with the sudden conviction that our little memories are but part of some great Memory that renews the world and men's thoughts age after age. . . . Shelley understood this, as is proved by what he says of the eternity of beautiful things and of the influence of the dead, but whether he understood that the great Memory is also a dwelling-house of symbols, of images that are living souls, I cannot tell. He had certainly experience of all but the most profound of the mystical states, and had known that union with created things which assuredly must precede the soul's union with uncreated spirit. He says, . . . mistaking a unique experience for the experience of all: 'Let us recollect our sensations as children . . . we less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt from ourselves. They seemed as it were to constitute one mass. There are some persons who in this respect are always children. Those who are subject to this state called reverie, feel as if their nature were resolved into the surrounding universe or as if the surrounding universe were resolved into their being,' and he must have expected to receive thoughts and images from beyond his own mind, just in so far as that mind transcended its preoccupation with particular time and place, for he believed inspiration a kind of death; and he could hardly have helped perceiving that an image that has transcended particular time and place becomes a symbol, passes beyond death, as it were, and becomes a living soul.
>
> E & I 78-80 (Italics added.)

In this third stage, individual personality and subjective feeling as such are entirely eradicated. The artist seeks to objectify feeling, create an impersonal art. Religious feeling in art has a tendency to express itself by means of abstraction, stylization, a certain hardness, coldness, repose. In his essays Yeats describes a picture by Gauguin; "The spectacle of tranquil Polynesian girls crowned with lilies gives me, I do not know why, religious ideas" (E & I 355). The same tranquillity with the added quality of abstraction and stylization is evident in the Byzantine mosaics which held such fascination for Yeats. In the description of tragedy (see above p. 34) he allies the impersonal, characterless masks of tragedy with the abstract figures of Egyptian temples, who appear to contemplate from afar. Accidental circumstances in this type of art are subordinated to the essential, as Yeats would say, the permanent and recurring; rather than the representation of particular detail we find an emphasis on line and form, and the quality of coolness and repose equivalent to asceticism in religion, the sloughing off of personal will and motivation so that one may be freed for an experience of enlargement. Long before the formulation of the principle of "aesthetic distance," Yeats declared "All imaginative art remains at a distance and this distance, once chosen, must be firmly held against a pushing world" (E & I 224). He was inclined to think that all great art has the characteristics that we

may see are typical of religious art, and that all art should choose a distance rather far removed from the ordinary scene of activity. He especially valued the qualities of coldness and timelessness: "Great art chills us at first by its coldness or strangeness, by what seems capricious, and yet it is from these qualities it has authority, as though it had fed on locusts and wild honey. . . . All art is the disengaging of a soul from place and history, its suspension in a beautiful or terrible light to await the Judgment, though it must be, seeing that all its days were a Last Day, judged already" (E & I 399). He thought, too, that art should seek to produce the third Hindu state in the souls of its readers, viewers, or audience. The motives of tragedy, he stated, "are not related to action but to changes of state" (see above p. 34). Again, in "The Tragic Theatre" we are told that tragic art employs devices to exclude or diminish character, and lessen daily reality.

> If the real world is not altogether rejected, it is but touched here and there, and into the places we have left empty we summon rhythm, balance, pattern, images that remind us of vast passions, the vagueness of past times, all the chimeras that haunt the edge of trance; and if we are painters, we shall express personal emotion through ideal form, a mask from whose eyes the disembodied looks, a style that remembers many masters that it may escape contemporary suggestion; or we shall leave out some element of reality as in Byzantine painting, where there is no mass, nothing in relief. . . .
>
> E & I 243

The audience of this sort of drama loses its sense of individual identity; entranced by rhythmic pattern and put into communication with the Anima Mundi by symbolic images,

it becomes united with the symbol, with all of Anima Mundi, with the deeper Self, in an aesthetic ritual of communion:

> Tragic art, passionate art, the drowner of dykes, the confounder of understanding, moves us by setting us to reverie [note the meaning of this word as it is emploed in "Shelley's Poetry" p. 39 above], by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance. The persons upon the stage, let us say, greaten till they are humanity itself. We feel our minds expand convulsively or spread out slowly like some moon-brightened image-crowded sea.
>
> E & I 245

In moments of passionate intensity the individual is joined to the symbol and realizes his part in the Anima Mundi. Although Yeats recognized that there are two types of personality, which he called the primary and the antithetical, he was inclined to emphasize the value of the antithetical personality and sometimes to discuss its path towards truth as the only path, since he considered the antithetical personality as the type of the artist and was always concerned in his prose writings with theories of art. His analysis of the primary personality appears in his autobiography, when, writing about Russell (AE), he says that there are some men who, so far from seeking Unity of Being by searching out their anti-self or mask, or image of desire, "can but seek the suppression of the anti-self, till the natural state alone remains." They must await

> that which lies beyond their mind--unities not of the mind, but unities of nature, unities of God--the man of science, the moralist . . . St. Anthony in his cavern, all those whose preoccupation is to seem nothing, to hollow their hearts till they are void and without form, to summon a creator by revealing chaos, to become the lamp for another's

> wick and oil; and it may be that it has been for their guidance that the perfectly proportioned human body" suffered crucifixion.
>
> Auto 150

These are objective men, who view reality as something outside themselves, and follow objective standards, the sort, as Yeats puts it, who "can but ask, 'Have I behaved as well as so-and-so?' 'Am I a good man according to the commandments?' 'Have my experiments and observations excluded the personal factor?'" (Auto 150). These are the men who seek not self-knowledge but knowledge of some other self; they are the braziers rather than the mirrors; their energy is not antithetical but imitative (DP 102). Actually their quest is the same as that of the antithetical man, and they reach the same goal though by different ways, for their Image, according to Yeats, becomes the "Image or epitome of the whole natural or supernatural world, and itself pursues. The wholeness of the supernatural world can only express itself in personal form, because it has no epitome but man, nor can The Hound of Heaven fling itself into any but an empty heart" (Auto 150). The primary personality is the type of the mystic, the "saint" as Yeats calls him. In A Vision we learn that the saint's joy is "to be nothing, to do nothing, to think nothing; but to permit the total life, expressed in its humanity, to flow in upon him and to express itself through his acts and thoughts" (180). Apparently, one distinction between the poet and the mystic is in type of personality. Primary men rarely create great art,

according to Yeats; for their imagination grows vivid only "in the expression of something which they have not themselves created, some historical religion or cause" (Auto 150), and when they live as most men must at times as hunters or pursuers their art "surrenders itself to moral or poetical commonplace, to a repetition of thoughts and images that have no relation to experience" (Auto 150-1). This may be because the powers of symbolic imagery are not as available to the primary man, so his artistic successes would depend upon his employment of a commonly understood symbolic tradition, such as that of an organized religion.[26]

Of much more concern to Yeats is the antithetical personality; at times he discusses this type as personality per se. The antithetical personality finds its creative energy in the tension generated by the conflict of opposites, the natural man opposing his Mask or Image. In Dramatis Personae Yeats wrote, "I think that all happiness depends upon the energy to assume the mask of some other self; that all joyous or creative life is a re-birth as something not one-self, something which has no memory and is created in a moment and perpetually renewed" (DP 130). It is part of the purpose of A Vision's instructors "to affirm that all the gains of man come from conflict with the opposite of his

---

[26]Yeats vacillated in his definition of "primary tincture" and "antithetical tincture," but generally we may consider that a primary personality is inclined to objectivity and an antithetical personality to subjectivity. See pp. 71-80 of A Vision for a metaphorical description of psychological types.

true being" (13); the "total life" that flows into the "empty spirit" is no longer even in the picture. Fourteen pages after giving the primary man his due in the Auto-biography, Yeats considers the antithetical type as the epitome of humanity:

> Genius is a crisis that joins that buried self for certain moments to our trivial daily mind. There are indeed, personifying spirits that we had best call but Gates and Gate-keepers, because through their dramatic power they bring our souls to crisis, to Mask and Image. . . . They scorn [contemplation] more than any possible life, unless it be but a name for the worst crisis of all. They have but one purpose, to bring their chosen man to the greatest obstacle he may confront without despair. . . . They [chosen men] and their sort alone earn contemplation, for it is only when the intellect has wrought the whole of life to drama, to crisis, that we may live for contemplation and yet keep our intensity.
>
> Auto 164-5

According to Yeats, the style of an artist is a discipline equivalent to the asceticism of the religious man. The creation of style forces a writer to be objective about his own emotions; instead of merely pouring out his feelings, he must shape them:

> In life courtesy and self-possession, and in the arts style, are the sensible impressions of the free mind, for both arise out of a deliberate shaping of all things, and from never being swept away, whatever the emotion, into confusion or dullness.
>
> E & I 253

His letters show that he recognized the "soft, lukewarm" quality, the lack of precise form, of his early poetry, and that he deliverately set about to change his manner. In a letter to Katherine Tynan he mocks the shallowness of depth

he has reached, then continues seriously: "Since I have left the 'Island' [a poem], I have been going about on shoreless seas. Nothing anywhere has clear outline. Everything is cloud and foam. 'Oisin' and the 'Seeker' are the only readable result" (Wade 88). He raised the status of art from mere craftmanship to a moral activity; the writing of poetry, he believed, requires a certain austerity, a detachment from personal experience, the control of the will over emotion. "I think that the true poetic movement of our time is towards some heroic discipline. . . . The lasting expression of our time is . . . in a sense of something steel-like and cold within the will, something passionate and cold" (Wade 836-7). Yeats's introductions to The Holy Mountain and The Mandukya Upanishad describe a religious ordeal, in which the would-be initiate must undergo a period of great cold, in this case in the snow and ice on the holy mountain. The cold becomes especially severe only when the pilgrim is already rather far advanced on his journey, shortly before he finds "the physical presence of his Divine Master." It is likely that the ordeal of cold represents the death of the ordinary senses, or at least the defeat of their power over man; the loss of animal warmth may be compared to the loss of ordinary vision and the quieting of the house in St. John of the Cross's obscure night of the soul.

The adoption of a mask, by forcing the artist to view

himself objectively, and to take as his ideal or quest the opposite of himself, is the first step in the development of a disciplinary style, as Yeats sees it. It is also a method of distancing oneself from practical concerns, so that things may be seen apart from their utility, in the light of their larger significance: "Style, personality--deliberately adopted and therefore a mask-- is the only escape from the hot-faced bargainers and the money-changers" (DP 85). The element of disinterestedness in men of action, which some have called morality, is equivalent to the style of a writer:

> The element which in men of action corresponds to style in literature is the moral element. Books live almost entirely because of their style, and the men of action who inspire movements after they are dead are those whose hold upon impersonal emotion and law lifts them out of immediate circumstance. . . . Men are dominated by self-conquest. . . . The self-conquest of the writer who is not a man of action is style.
>
> DP 143

By holding up to himself the image of something he is not, a man may achieve this self-conquest: "If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are and assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves, though we may accept one from others. Active virtue as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a current code is therefore theatrical, constantly dramatic, the wearing of a mask" (DP 94).

The intensity maintained by the effort of wearing a mask, by living with two states of consciousness in conflict,

by attempting to draw closer to one's ideal image, generates the energy of the artist's creative drive, and, as Yeats thought, often also provides his subject material, by uniting him with his anti-self and thus opening the way to self-knowledge and truth in general. The assumption of an anti-self confronts a man with the greatest obstacle he can face without despair; the antithetical man, as we have seen, may achieve unity of being in such a crisis, when all his faculties are called to their highest effort, in a moment of intense and visionary passion. In Yeats's poem "Ego Dominus Tuus," the antithetical man, "Ille," says that he calls to his own opposite by the help of an image, for

> Those men that in their writings are most wise
> Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts.
> I call to the mysterious one who yet
> Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream
> And look most like me, being indeed my double,
> And prove of all imaginable things
> The most unlike, being my anti-self,
> And, standing by these characters, disclose
> All that I seek.
>
> CP 159

The man who walks the wet sands is the "Fisherman," the double for whom the author will yet write a poem as "cold and passionate as the dawn" (CP 146), and the characters by which he stands are Ille's scribblings in the sand, his efforts at style. After his description of the antithetical man in his autobiography, Yeats adds, "As I look backward upon my writing, I take pleasure alone in those verses where it seems to me I have found something hard and cold, some articulation of the Image, which is the opposite of all that

I am in my daily life" (Auto 13). Aware that in much of his poetry the subject is himself, Yeats insists that not only does he write about himself; in a way his poetry is himself:

> The friends that have it I do wrong
> Whenever I remake a song
> Should know what issue is at stake:
> It is myself that I remake.

The beauty an artist creates, the truth he discovers or reveals, is in a sense a part of his being. Explaining that the artist must not offer a false beauty to the world, by hiding ugliness, Yeats declares:

> He only can create the greatest imaginable beauty who has endured all imaginable pangs, for only when we have seen and foreseen what we dread shall we be rewarded by that dazzling unforeseen wing-footed wanderer. We could not find him if he were not in some sense of our being and yet of our being but as water with fire, a noise with silence.
>
> PASL 494

The artist must have endured "all imaginable pangs," and "seen and foreseen" all he may dread, that in the face of everything he may yet rejoice, with the gaiety and affirmation of the saint. In Yeats's letters he says, "Bitterness is fatal to us . . . Our traditions only permit us to bless, for the arts are an extension of the beatitudes" (Wade 832), and again, "To me the supreme aim is an act of faith and reason to make one rejoice in the midst of tragedy" (838). Much of Yeats's poetry is the celebration of activity undertaken for its own sake, frequently symbolized by the dance, an exultation in pure being. (Dancing also stands for the life in fairyland or the other world, where the antinomies

are resolved in Unity of Being.) The figure of the dancer is often representative of the saint or the saintly poet; the Fiddler of Dooney says that "the good are always the merry . . . And the merry love the fiddle, / And the merry love to dance" (71). The Irish airman has no ulterior motive for his flying; he was driven to this "tumult in the skies" simply by a "lonely impulse of delight" (CP 133). Of the three hermits, only the third has attained a state of blessedness; unconcerned with his afterlife, he sings like a bird, already in heaven (CP 111). The ancient Chinese in "Lapis Lazuli" (291-3) play gay melodies while they stare on the tragic scene of civilizations at war.

The "dazzling wanderer" discovered by the artist, a beauty which is of his being as water with fire, is merely his own subjective experience regarded objectively, as typical of all such experience, and symbolic of truth. As the saint has detached himself from all worldly experience, the artist has sufficiently detached himself from his own passions that he may see them as typical of what is permanent and recurring in the world: "The imaginative writer differs from the saint in that he identifies himself--to the neglect of his own soul, alas!--with the soul of the world, and frees himself from all that is impermanent in that soul, an ascetic not of women and wine but of the newspapers" (E & I 286). The artist sees himself as part of the spectacle of the world, and mixes "into all that he

sees that flavour of extravagance, or of humour, or of philosophy, that makes one understand that he contemplates even his own death as if it were another's and finds in his own destiny but as it were a projection through a burning glass of that general to men" (E & I 322). Following Yeats's dictum that "all fine literature is the disinterested contemplation or expression of life" (Ex 197), the artist views objects, events, and emotions, even his own, apart from their particular circumstances, and endows them with more general significance: "If you liberate a person or a landscape from the bonds of motives and their actions, causes, and effects, and from all bonds but the bonds of your love, it will change under your eyes, and become a symbol of an infinite emotion, a perfected emotion, a part of the Divine Essence" (E & I 149).

Yeats explains that the liberated object becomes a symbol of the infinite and the perfect because "we love nothing but the perfect, and our dreams make all things perfect, that we may love them" (E & I 149). Dreaming, apparently the sort of reverie Shelley knew, seems to be an essentially artistic activity. The line between religious vision and the vision of artistic dream is difficult to determine; Yeats at least makes no attempt at distinction as he continues, "Religious and visionary people, monks and nuns, and medicine-men and opium-eaters, see symbols in their trances; for religious and visionary thought is

thought about perfection and the way to perfection; and symbols are the only things free enough from all bonds to speak of perfection" (E & I 149).

Now, at some stages of their journey, religious mystics do see symbolic visions, but according to most sacred literature, the highest stages of mystic experience do not make use of any symbol at all; they are entirely inexpressible. The artist may know the third state of the soul as it is described in the Upanishads, but it is not at all necessary to his art that he enjoy such a union with all existence, only that he have sufficient knowledge to employ symbols effectively; and as a matter of fact the inner conflict caused by his failure to find unity of being may well result in his being driven to discover that unity in his art. As Yeats said, we make out "of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry" (PASL 492). That he recognized the inadequacy of all symbol and metaphor in the final stages of religious experience is quite evident in his introductions to translations from Hindu lore. The fourth state of the soul is objectless, "because objects are lost in complete light" (E & I 463), the supernatural light said to be characteristic of most illuminative experiences. The hermit Ribh in Yeats's poem, "Ribh Considers Christian Love Insufficient," knows that "At stroke of midnight soul cannot endure / A bodily or mental furniture" (CP 285). In the poem "There" the speaker, probably Ribh, attempts to describe

the unified reality one may perceive at such moments:

> There all the barrel-hoops are knit,
> There all the serpent-tails are bit,
> There all the gyres converge in one,
> There all the planets drop in the Sun.
>
> 284

The reader who is acquainted with Yeats's symbols knows what he is saying, but it is merely an intellectual apprehension; Ribh is quite unable to share with us his experience.

The capacity of the symbolist poet to travel any distance along the mystic way is to be attributed to the correspondence between the natural and supernatural orders upon which most theories of symbolism depend. To Yeats, the universe was a macrocosm whose total structure might be appreciated through the microcosm, for "all things hang like a drop of dew / Upon a blade of grass." The smallest element might serve as a symbol of the whole, a vortex expanding outward until it has encompassed everything, (or rather, inward, since reality is mental): "I draw myself up into the symbol and it seems as if I should know all if I could but banish memories and find everything in the symbol" (V 301). Yeats considered supernatural and natural the two ends of a pair of interpenetrating gyres or cones.

> The stallion Eternity
> Mounted the mare of Time,
> 'Gat the foal of the world.
>
> CP 264

He accepted the Platonic doctrine that "things below are

copies":

> Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed.
> As man, as beast, as an ephemeral fly begets,
> Godhead begets Godhead,
> For things below are copies, the Great Smaragdine
> Tablet said.
>
> CP 283

As a corollary he believed that one might communicate with the spiritual through the physical, and that there is no hard and fast distinction between the biological and the psychological or intellectual. This is the conviction expressed by the great majority of the characters in his later poems: Crazy Jane, who affirms that "All things remain in God," that "Fair and foul are near of kin," and that "Love is all / Unsatisfied / That cannot take the whole / Body and soul"; Ribh, who insists that he finds Godhead in sexual ecstasy; Old Tom, who regards all the natural cones--"Winding-sheet and swaddling clothes," as moments in eternity, and emanations from the Universal Self, who says that as Plotinus swims toward the "Golden Race," "stately Pythagoras / And all the choir of Love" (264) in the supernatural world, his eyes are blocked by salt blood"; the Woman Young and Old, who attains all knowledge and unity of being through carnal knowledge:

> If questioned on
> My utmost pleasure with a man
> By some new-married bride, I take
> That stillness for a theme
> Where his heart my heart did seem
> And both adrift on the miraculous stream
> Where--wrote a learned astrologer--
> The Zodiac is changed into a sphere.
>
> CP 268

If natural and supernatural, physical and spiritual, are so closely related, then no purely abstract statement can convey a whole truth. It is the job of the artist to imitate Attis, the reborn earth god of pagan antiquity who hung his image at just that point on the tree of life where the flame and the green, the world of spirit and the world of matter, are conjoined.

> A tree there is that from its topmost bough
> Is half all glittering flame and half all green;
> . . . . . .
> And he that Attis' image hangs between
> That staring fury and the blind lush leaf
> May know not what he knows, but knows not grief.
>
> CP 245

The artist who so combines the two worlds achieves unity of being and knows an aesthetic joy somewhat similar to mystic wisdom, though he may not be able to formulate an intellectual statement about what he knows. Yeats always insisted that truth was understood by the whole body:

> It is still true that the Deity gives us, according to His promise, not His thoughts or His convictions but His flesh and blood, and I believe that the elaborate technique of the arts, seeming to create out of itself a superhuman life, has taught more men to die than oratory or the Prayer Book. We only believe in those thoughts which have been conceived not in the brain but in the whole body.
>
> E & I 235

Yeats in old age, prays that

> God guard me from those thoughts men think
> In the mind alone;
> He that sings a lasting song
> Thinks in a marrow-bone.
>
> CP 281

In his essay, "The Thinking of the Body," Yeats tells us

that painting could not move us, "if our thought did not rush out to the edges of our flesh" (E & I 292); and scientific studies of the effect of various artistic forms have been conducted to prove that our appreciation of art does depend to some extent upon physiological processes.[27]

The poet, whose thought "springs from body and in body falls" (CP 440), does not accompany the religious mystic along the entire length of his journey because his purpose is not union with a transcendent being but the knowledge and expression of truth. Whereas the mystic, if like St. John of the Cross he is also an artist, attempts to put his vision into some form whereby it may be partially communicated, the poet may seek through symbolic form to gain a vision, but the poetry comes first. In an early essay Yeats wrote that Shelley "had known that union with created things which assuredly must precede the soul's union with uncreated spirit" (see above p. 39). This knowledge, found in the sort of meditative "reverie" Yeats strove to cultivate, may be a requirement of the mystical poet and is often a characteristic of the symbolist, but by itself is not enough for qualification as a mystic. In a later essay Yeats clarifies the point: "Shelley was not a mystic, his system of thought was constructed by his logical faculty to

---

[27]George Birkhoff, Aesthetic Measure (Cambridge, Mass., 1933); Joseph Schillinger, The Mathematical Basis of the Arts (N. Y., 1948); George Santayana, Sense of Beauty, Part III, section 20 (Modern Library, '55).

satisfy desire, not a symbolical revelation received after the suspension of all desire. . . . The mystic so lives as to dedicate his initiatory image, and its generated images, not to his own but to the Divine Purpose, and after certain years attains the saint's miraculous life" (E & I 422).

The poet does not strive for the fourth Hindu stage, the identity with the source of all, the union with uncreated spirit, lest in that "objectless" state he be "struck dumb in the simplicity of fire," as the Heart warns the Soul in Yeats's poem "Vacillation," (247) and he become as incoherent as Ribh in his ecstasy. The introduction to The Holy Mountain tells us that "what the artist perceives through a medium, the saint perceives immediately" (E & I 462). We, too, must perceive through a medium, as "through a glass, darkly"; and without the symbols and forms he borrows from the natural world of ephemeral objects the artist cannot communicate with us. Yeats borrows the traditional image of the divine as "the still point of the turning wheel":

> If it be true that God is a circle whose centre is everywhere, the saint goes to the centre, the poet and the artist to the ring where everything comes round again. The poet must not seek for what is still and fixed, for that has no life for him; and if he did, his style would become cold and monotonous, and his sense of beauty faint and sickly. . . but be content to find his pleasure in all that is for ever passing away that it may come again.
>
> E & I 287

The true mystic perceives so directly that he has no use for symbols; in the attempt to describe his experience or communicate the revelation he believes he has been granted,

he must either employ the traditional language already formulated for him by an organized religion or recall some earlier stage of his journey. Paradoxically, his artistic limitations are due to his surpassing of imaginative limitations:

> The systematic mystic is not the greatest of artists, because his imagination is too great to be bounded by a picture or a song, and because only imperfection in a mirror of perfection, or perfection in a mirror of imperfection, delights our frailty.
>
> E & I 150

Bound on the turning wheel as we are, and caught up by Experience, we can appreciate eternal reality only as it is mirrored in the vegetable glass of Nature (to borrow the two images most frequently used by Yeats in this context). The artist stands between the saint and the world of impermanent things; while the saint renounces everything for the sake of personal eternity, the artist for the sake of eternal art renounces the impermanent in his sense, the purely personal and subjective, and dwells on "those things that are permanent in the soul of the world" (E & I 286), for "the end of art is the ecstasy awakened by the presence before an ever-changing mind of what is permanent in the world" (E & I 287).

As we have seen, the artistic and the mystic ways are similar in some respects. In search of symbol and metaphor, the poet may go as far as the "union with all created things" discovered during the most successful "reverie," the sort of meditation or self-hypnosis Yeats

frequently said he practiced. This type of contemplative experience may also be considered a loosening of the ego's control over the subconscious, so that associations may form more easily. Due to the employment of symbolism, the creative process is also noetic or truth-revealing; but unlike the true mystic the poet can communicate part of his discovery to his readers or listeners. His experience is therefore not entirely ineffable, except that it may not be presented by any statement formulated by the discursive intellect. The systematic mystic attains to a more exalted wisdom, perceived directly rather than through a medium; whereas the artist must follow the winding movement of nature, the mystic shoots straight into the sun. Yeats borrows from Blake the image of the arrow or the straight line and the serpent or the crooked line to represent the paths of the religious sage and the artist:

> I think that we who are poets and artists, not being permitted to shoot beyond the tangible, must go from desire to weariness and so to desire again, and live but for the moment when vision comes to our weariness like terrible lighting, in the humility of brutes. . . . We seek reality with the slow toil of our weakness and are smitten from the boundless and unforeseen. Only when we are saint or sage, and renounce Experience itself, can we, in imagery of the Christian Caballa, leave the sudden lightning and the path of the serpent and become the bowman who aims his arrow at the centre of the sun.
>
> PASL 503-4

Although the spiritual may be reached through the physical, Attracta of Yeats's play, The Herne's Egg, knows that it is but as a medium. She declares her love for the supreme

being to whom she is betrothed:

> Strong sinew and soft flesh
> Are foliage round the shaft
> Before the arrowsmith
> Has stripped it, and I pray
> That I, all foliage gone,
> May shoot into my joy.
>
> CPl 412

Another important difference between the mystic and the artist, as Yeats defines them, is in type of personality. Usually an antithetical man, the artist may find at the same time fulfillment and self-transcendence in the adoption of a mask and the creation of his art. The religious sage, on the other hand, is a primary type, and considers the image as something distinct from himself; he finds unity of being in the attainment of no lesser image than the antithetical self of the entire world:

> The saint would climb without wandering to the antithetical self of the world, the Indian narrowing his thought in meditation or driving it away in contemplation, the Christian copying Christ, the antithetical self of the classic world.
>
> PASL 500

Yeats suggests that artists suffer from inner conflicts, and that their art is in part determined by the peculiar cause of their division, by their lack, weakness, or failure.

> I think that all noble things are the result of warfare; great nations and classes, of warfare in the visible world, great poetry and philosophy, of invisible warfare, the division of a mind within itself, a victory, the sacrifice of a man to himself.
>
> E & I 321

Synge created out of his poverty and sickness beautiful images of health and happiness; the lecherous Dante was led

to his great vision by the image of Beatrice as the purest woman conceivable (E & I 321; CP 158). It is natural then, to ask, what particular conflict we may discern in Yeats, since presumably he was generalizing from personal experience. In the next section we will present evidence for the argument that the role of the saint was very attractive to him, but that his ultimate choice was the way of the poet.

CHAPTER III

THE CHOICE

> The intellect of man is forced to choose
> Perfection of the life, or of the work,
> And if it take the second must refuse
> A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.
> When all that story's finished, what's the news?
> In luck or out the toil has left its mark:
> That old perplexity an empty purse,
> Or the day's vanity, the night's remorse.
>
> CP 242

In his autobiography Yeats tells us that "all life weighed in the scales of my own life seems to me a preparation for something that never happens" (Auto 65). His last poem, "The Black Tower," is spoken by a group of soldiers guarding a besieged tower for a king whose arrival was expected long ago. Sometimes the tower's old cook climbs up to catch "small birds in the dew of the morn," a habit which according to Yeatsian symbolism marks him as an artist-type or a man concerned with things of the spirit; occasionally he imagines he hears the king's great horn, but is always disappointed, and the soldiers call him a "lying hound." The only forces in evidence are those of the besiegers:

> Those banners come to bribe or threaten,
> Or whisper that a man's a fool
> Who, when his own right king's forgotten,
> Cares what king sets up his rule.

If he died so long ago
Why do you dread us so?

CP 340

All "oath-bound men," they continue to await their leader, though unsure that he even exists. Perhaps we may compare their unfulfilled expectation to Yeats's hope for a certain knowledge of spiritual truths, whose province he always defended with no assurance that anything could ever come to claim it. The activity of poetry-writing was to him a very serious undertaking, and one of the most important we can know, since in an age of unbelief and doubt like ours the poet must take on the burden of the priest. "I always feel," he wrote to Sturge Moore, "that my work is not drama but the ritual of a lost faith."[28] In his autobiography he asks himself, "Am I going against nature in my constant attempt to fill my life with work? Is my mind as rich as in idle days? Is not perhaps the poet's labour a mere rejection? If he seek purity -- the ridding of his life of all but poetry -- will not inspiration come? Can one reach God by toil?" (DP 150). At times he seemed to feel that his labor might be of some avail in winning knowledge of spiritual truths, at other times he doubted the possibility, and never was he sure there is any such thing. In one of his last poems, "The Man and the Echo," the Man has the last word:

---

[28]Quoted by Ellmann in Identity, p. 179.

O Rocky Voice,
Shall we in that great night rejoice?
What do we know but that we face
One another in this place?

CP 338

With the self-discipline he compared to that of an ascetic, he always strove to educate his visionary faculties that he might attain the insight of the mystic, or as he termed it, the "saint."

Myself I must remake
Till I am Timon and Lear
Or that William Blake
Who beat upon the wall
Till truth obeyed his call.

CP 299

No man beat upon the wall with more persistence, yet Truth kept herself hidden. At the end of A Vision, having completed one of the longest and most exhaustive investigations in all literature of a single symbol, Yeats writes that he had expected to discover everything through this symbol, "but nothing comes--though this moment was to reward me for all my toil" (V 301).

His one unwavering faith was in the value of Imagination and those experiences of intense consciousness he called "unity of being." At first glance A Vision according to the author's own estimation appears to have been a personal failure, but then we read: "I have already said all that can be said. The particulars are the work of the thirteenth sphere or cycle which is in every man and called by every man his freedom. Doubtless, for it can do all things, it knows what it will do with its freedom but it

has kept the secret" (V 302). The thirteenth sphere, both God and the spiritual human community, has kept the secret because each man must create and define it for himself; this is a corollary to Yeats's belief that so-called "external reality" is at least in a sense a creation of the imagination. The best one can do, apparently, is to order what seem to be data into patterns in one's mind. The most comprehensive organization must include man's feelings and desires as well as "brute facts," hence the superiority of mythology over philosophy. In a letter to his father Yeats wrote: "I think with you that the poet seeks truth, not abstract truth, but a kind of vision of reality which satisfies the whole being. It will not be true for one thing unless it satisfies his desires, his most profound desires. . . . I think the poet reveals truth by revealing those desires" (Wade 588). He called his own Vision a myth (Wade 781) and insisted that we should reject all philosophy that does not begin in myth (E & I 409). He defines myth as not a fiction, but "one of those statements our nature is compelled to make and employ as a truth though there cannot be sufficient evidence" (Ex 392). And in the introduction to A Vision we are told that his system is really a poetical or mythical organization of truth, not to be taken literally, a set of "stylistic arrangements of experience comparable to the cubes in the drawing of Wyndham Lewis and to the ovoids in the sculpture of Brancusi. They have helped me to hold

in a single thought reality and justice" (V 25).

Yeats had hoped that the symbol he explored would be his "open sesame" to the unitive experience sometimes called truth, that the symbol according to a process one may compare to the mystic way would take him by the hand, open the door to the Infinite, introduce him to his anti-self, and then dissolve, while heaven blazed into his head. According to Yeats's system, however, "antithetical types" find unified experience of any sort very difficult to attain. The very possession of a double self recognized as such seems to act as a buffer against direct experience and as a hindrance to the discovery of the almost limitless energy Yeats felt he would find in the concentration of his faculties upon a single focus, the liberation of dormant powers he was convinced could be effected by a man's confrontation of "the greatest obstacle he could face without despair." In Rosa Alchemica Yeats reminiscences:

> I had gathered about me all gods because I believed in none, and experienced every pleasure because I gave myself to none, but held myself apart, individual, indissoluble, a mirror of polished steel. I looked in the triumph of this imagination at the birds of Hera, glittering in the light of the fire as though of Byzantine mosaic; and to my mind, for which symbolism was a necessity, they seemed the doorkeepers of my world, shutting out all that was not of as affluent a beauty as their own; and for a moment I thought . . . that it was possible to rob life of every bitterness but the bitterness of death; and then a thought . . . filled me with a passionate sorrow. All those forms: that Madonna . . . those bronze divinities . . . belonged to a divine world wherein I had no part; and every experience, however profound, every perception, however exquisite, would bring me the bitter dream of a limitless energy I could never know, and even in my

> most perfect moment I would be two selves, the one watching with heavy eyes the other's moment of content.
>
> Myth 269

The possessor of two usually conflicting states of consciousness, the antithetical personality can very rarely give a whole-hearted assent to any belief, even a belief in the meaning of what he has experienced. In his autobiography Yeats says that during occult events he seems to have witnessed he kept asking himself if he wasn't deceived. While the saint, a primary type, may regard his experience as objectively valid, the antithetical man is forever questioning. Yeats answers a letter of Ethel Mannin's: "Am I a mystic?--no, I am a practical man. I have seen the raising of Lazarus and the loaves and fishes and have made the usual measurements, plummet line, spirit-level, and have taken the temperature by pure mathematic" (Wade 921).

Speaking of the conflicts inherent in the poet as type, he writes, "When I think of any great poetical writer of the past . . . I comprehend, if I know the lineaments of his life, that the work is the man's flight from his entire horoscope, his blind struggle in the network of the stars" (PASL 489). In his own system he put himself in phase seventeen, as "the daimonic man," along with Dante, Shelley, and Landor.[29] The daimonic man's true mask is "simplification through intensity," and his true creative mind,

---

[29]Richard Ellmann, The Man and the Masks (N. Y., 1948) p. 236.

"creative imagination through antithetical emotion." The description begins:

> He is called the Daimonic man because Unity of Being, and consequent expression of Daimonic throught, is now more easy than at any other phase. As contrasted with Phase 13 and Phase 14, where mental images were separated from one another that they might be subject to knowledge, all now flow, change, flutter, cry out, or mix into something else. . . . The separated fragments seek images rather than ideas, and these the intellect, seated in Phase 13, must synthesize in vain, drawing with its compass-point a line that shall but represent the outline of a bursting pod. The being has for its supreme aim . . . to hide from itself and others this separation and disorder. . . . The intellect must turn all its synthetic power to this task. . . . It finds . . . a Mask of simplicity that is also intensity . . . and yet the Will is always aware of the Body of Fate, which perpetually destroys this intensity.
>
> V 141-2

The daimonic man is recognizeably the type of the poet. The only new characteristic here is the will's awareness of the body of fate, which, interestingly enough, is from phase twenty-seven, that of the saint. Furthermore, in order to realize himself as a poet or other sort of artist, the daimonic man must paradoxically flee his body of fate, for his creativity is only through antithetical emotion, and his required mask of simplicity through intensity is perpetually destroyed by an awareness of fate. Yet without such a body of fate it is doubtful the poet would have any antithetical emotion at all. In Per Amica Silentia Lunae Yeats wrote, "I think it was Heraclitus who said: the Daemon is our destiny. When I think of life as a struggle with the Daemon, who would ever set us to the hardest work among

those not impossible, I understand why there is a deep enmity between a man and his destiny, and why a man loves nothing but his destiny" (499).

It may be that Yeats secretly felt he should have been a saint, or at least that in adopting the role of the poet he was not only taking on the burden that had fallen from the shoulders of the priest, but also setting himself up as the recipient of a special grace--only so much grace, however, as would allow him to perceive dimly through the medium of the natural world, eternal truths of the supernatural. At times he hoped that the artistic way would not prove to "the neglect of his soul":

> The other day I was walking towards Urbino where I was to spend the night. . . . I was alone amid a visionary, fantastic, impossible scenery. . . . Upon another mountain a mediaeval tower, with no building near nor any sign of life, rose into the clouds. I saw suddenly in the mind's eye an old man, erect and a little gaunt, standing in the door of the tower, while about him broke a windy light. He was the poet who had at last, because he had done so much for the word's sake, come to share in the dignity of the saint. He had hidden nothing of himself, but he had taken care of 'that dignity . . . the perfection of form . . . this lofty and severe quality . . . this virtue.' And though he had but sought it for the word's sake, or for a woman's praise, it had come at last into his body and his mind. Certainly as he stood there he knew how from behind that laborious mood, that pose, that genius, no flower of himself but all himself, looked out as from behind a mask that other Who alone of all men, the country-people say, is not a hair's-breadth more nor less than six feet high.
>
> E & I 291

We remember Yeats's fascination with towers, and his adoption of the tower as a symbol for himself. No doubt the

"windy light" is an indication of the poet's sainthood, for in "Prometheus Unbound" he comments, "There is much curious evidence to show that the Divine Purpose descends into the mind at moments of inspiration, not as spiritual life alone but as what seems a physical brightness. . . . We understand why the first Christian painters encircled certain heads with light" (E & I 423). This particular poet, Yeats's dream-image of himself, has so successfully grown into his pose and genius that now the "antithetical self of the entire world," the Divine, has taken him for its mask.

Lacking the saint's simplicity of consciousness, Yeats chose to make a virtue of his inner division, and developed a method and theory of the Mask whereby he hoped to attain vision similar to the mystic's. At the death of AE (George Russell), Mrs. Yeats remarked to her husband, "AE was the nearest to a saint you or I will ever meet. You are a better poet but no saint. I suppose one has to choose" (Wade 838). Actually, the choice of temperament was not left to Yeats. Naturally a skeptic, he was determined to affirm as much as he could; he remained with what he knew, and in his art depicted "a vision of reality which satisfies the whole being," a vision of psychological reality including in its focus the dreams and desires of man. He clarified his position in a speech to the British Association:

> We [artists], on the other hand, are Adams of a different Eden, a more terrible Eden, perhaps, for

> we must name and number the passions and motives of men. There, too, everything must be known, everything understood, everything expressed; there, also, there is nothing common, nothing unclean; every motive must be followed through all the obscure mystery of its logic. Mankind must be seen and understood in every possible circumstance, in every conceivable situation. There is no laughter too bitter, no passion too terrible to be set before the minds of men. The Greeks knew that. Only in this way can mankind be understood, only when we have put ourselves in all the possible positions of life, from the most miserable to those that are so lofty that we can only speak of them in symbols and in mysteries, will entire wisdom be possible.
>
> Ex 243

Whether or not our inner realities have their objective correlative in the external world was a question Yeats was sometimes inclined to evade by insisting that our minds make the only reality, but at other times he faced the problem and admitted that we have no answer. Perhaps all our analytical thought will only reveal a wasteland:

> Civilisation is hooped together, brought
> Under a rule, under the semblance of peace
> By manifold illusion; but man's life is thought,
> And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
> Ravening through century after century,
> Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come
> Into the desolation of reality.
>
> CP 287

In one of his lyrics Rilke tells us that even in the face of despair, evil, and oblivion, the poet's job is to praise. Yeats similarly declares that the poet sings amid his uncertainty (PASL 492). He wrote to Olivia Shakespeare that the poem "Vacillation" "puts clearly an argument that has gone on in my head for years" (Wade 789). The section to which he was referring is as follows in the final version:

The Soul. Seek out reality, leave things that seem.
The Heart. What, be a singer born and lack a theme?
The Soul. Isaiah's coal, what more can man desire?
The Heart. Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!
The Soul. Look on that fire, salvation walks within.
The Heart. What theme had Homer but original sin?

CP 247

The poet can not seek out reality or certainty, for he is bound to the turning wheel of the world, to the world of appearances. If the seraphim touched his lips with the burning coal, as he did Isaiah's, his sin would be purged, but he could no longer express man's condition. Yeats told Florence Farr that he began eastern meditations "with the object of trying to lay hands upon some dynamic and substantialising force as distinguished from the eastern quiescent and supersensualizing state of the soul--a movement downwards upon life, not upwards out of life" (Wade 469). The occult, the magical, the mystical, the religious, were always subordinate to poetry.

Towards the end Yeats most certainly did face despair. He told Mrs. Llewelyn Davies in a letter, "My poetry is generally written out of despair" (Wade 886). Even in this mood, however, he is able to affirm, for one of his last poems, "The Man and The Echo," is a powerful statement of faith in the human spirit.

All that I have said and done,
Now that I am old and ill,
Turns into a question till
I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right.
. . . . . .

And all seems evil until I
Sleepless would lie down and die.
. . . . . .
That were to shirk
The spiritual intellect's great work,
And shirk it in vain. There is no release
In a bodkin or disease,
Nor can there be work so great
As that which cleans man's dirty slate
While man can still his body keep
Wine or love drug him to sleep,
Waking he thanks the Lord that he
Has body and its stupidity,
But body gone he sleeps no more,
And till his intellect grows sure
That all's arranged in one clear view,
Pursues the thoughts that I pursue,
Then stands in judgment on his soul.
And, all work done, dismisses all
Out of intellect and sight
And sinks at last into the night.

CP 337-8

In A Vision Yeats "arranged in one clear view" all the minute particulars of existence. The Great Wheel's revolutions represent both the antinomies which contain each other and the cyclical patterns of birth, death, and rebirth. All the elements of human history, of psychological life, of seasonal and astonomical time and motion, and of both this life and the after-life, are related to one another in a single symbolic structure. As the most perfect of forms, the circle is at once the symbol of cyclical movement and time in our natural world, and of timeless eternity. Thus Yeats had "wed" natural and supernatural by "the self-same ring.[30]

---

[30]See V 248-9 for a discussion of the circle and its enclosure of eternity and the temporal world.

It is quite clear that A Vision is meant to be regarded as an artistic construct rather than a revelation. We are told that the instructors came to give "metaphors for poetry," and that the circuits of their metaphoric system are "stylistic arrangements of experience." Indeed, Yeats was inclined to think that the patterns we see in the universe are largely imposed by our own minds, by the imagination which creates its own truth. He wrote in "The Symbolism of Poetry" that

> All writers, all artists of any kind, in so far as they have had any philosophical or critical power, perhaps just in so far as they have been deliberate artists at all, have had some philosophy, some criticism of their art; and it has often been this philosophy, or this criticism, that has evoked their most startling inspiration, calling into outer life some portion of the divine life, or of the buried reality, which could alone extinguish in the emotions what their philosophy or their criticism would extinguish in the intellect.
>
> E & I 154

The inspiration connecting "outer life" with "divine life," philosophy and the criticism, satisfy a human need for order and meaning; both the art and the philosophy bring order into human experience, but the principle of order itself is to be found in the mind. In his autobiography Yeats says that truth is a state of mind, rather than something that can be discursively formulated (DP 88-9). A shepherd in one of his early poems tells us, "There is no truth / Saving in thine own heart" (CP 7); and the "Indian Upon God" hints that we make or interpret religion according to our life experience. Elsewhere Yeats quotes with approval

Shelley's Julian: "Where is the love, beauty, and truth we seek, But in our mind?" (E & I 70). Cuchulain in the author's last play says, "I make the truth";[31] that this "making" is the work of the artistic imagination is unequivocally stated in the poem "Wisdom":

> The true faith discovered was
> When painted panel, statuary,
> Glass-mosaic, window-glass,
> Amended what was told awry
> By some peasant gospeller;
> Swept the sawdust from the floor
> Of that working-carpenter.
>
> CP 216[32]

Although A Vision postulates ultimate reality as a spherical unity, Yeats does not pretend that he knows this reality himself. The antinomies, as it is explained in "The Soul in Judgment," force us to perceive only the cone (V 240). Yeats wrote to one of his correspondents that to him all things were made of the conflict of two states of consciousness (Wade 918). The resolution of this conflict can only be achieved by the artifice of the mask, in poetry or personality. Thus, while man cannot know the truth, he may embody it in his verse or in himself (see V 181; Wade 922), by undergoing the discipline of the mask, and so mirroring the spherical unity in the conjunction of his will and image. Yeats thought that the poet usually adopted one of a half dozen traditional poses, "the lover or saint,

---

[31] W. B. Yeats, "The Death of Cuchulain," Collected Plays (N. Y., 1953), p. 441.

[32] See also CP, "Tower," "Two Songs from a Play."

sage or sensualist, or mere mocker of all life" (Auto 53). He himself chiefly vacillated between the lover and the saint. In confronting himself with the image of the saint, the man who totally affirms, Yeats was enabled to create out of "the quarrel with himself" an aesthetic unity of reality that he did not perceive either in his own being or in the world.

A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adams, Hazard. Blake and Yeats: The Contrary Vision. Ithaca, New York, 1955.

_____. The Structure of Myth in the Poetry of William Blake and W. B. Yeats. Microfilmed Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1953.

Bayley, John. The Romantic Survival: A Study in Poetic Evolution. London, 1957.

Ellmann, Richard. The Identity of Yeats. New York, 1954.

_____. Yeats: The Man and The Masks. New York, 1948.

Hall, James, and Steinmann, Martin (eds.) The Permanence of Yeats. New York, 1961.

Holroyd, Stuart. Emergence from Chaos. Boston, 1957.

James, William. The Varieties of Religious Experience. New York, 1958.

Menon, V. K. Narayana. The Development of W. B. Yeats. Philadelphia, 1961.

Parkinson, Thomas. W. B. Yeats: The Later Poetry. Berkeley, California, 1964.

Rudd, Margaret. The Divided Image: A Study of William Blake and W. B. Yeats. London, 1953.

Seiden, Morton Irving. William Butler Yeats: The Poet As a Mythmaker. Michigan, 1962.

Underhill, Evelyn. Mysticism. New York, 1912.

Unterecker, John, (ed.) Yeats: A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1963.

Ure, Peter. Towards A Mythology: Studies in The Poetry of W. B. Yeats. London, 1946.

Ure, Peter. "Yeats's Supernatural Songs," Review of English Studies, VII (1956), 38-51.

Yeats, W. B. Autobiography. New York, 1953.

_____. Collected Plays. New York, 1953.

_____. Collected Poems. New York, 1956.

_____. Essays. New York, 1924.

_____. Essays and Introductions. New York, 1961.

_____. Explorations. New York, 1962.

_____. The Letters of W. B. Yeats. Edited by Allan Wade. New York, 1955.

_____. Letters to the New Island. Cambridge, Mass., 1934.

_____. Mythologies. New York, 1959.

_____. A Vision. New York, 1938.